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Sociological Status of Women Among Rabha Tribe: A Glimpse

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ABSTRACT

The Rabha tribe is one of the prominent indigenous communities of North-East India, primarily residing in Assam, Meghalaya, and parts of North Bengal. Women play a vital role in the social, economic, cultural, and familial life of the Rabha community. This article examines the sociological status of women among the Rabha tribe with special reference to their position within family, participation in economic activities, educational attainment, social rights, and cultural practices. The study explores the traditional and contemporary dimensions of women's lives and highlights the factors influencing their social status. Rabha women actively contribute to agriculture, household management, weaving, and community activities, thereby enhancing their importance in the tribe's socio-economic structure. Understanding the sociological status of Rabha women is essential for formulating inclusive development policies and preserving the cultural heritage of the Rabha community while promoting women's rights and well-being. In this article, the sociological status of women among the Rabha tribe: a glimpse was discussed.

Keywords: *Sociology, Women, Rabha, Tribe.*

INTRODUCTION

Women occupy a central position in every society as agents of socialization, cultural continuity, and socio-economic development. The status of women is widely regarded as an important indicator of social progress and human development. In tribal societies, women play multifaceted roles as caregivers, economic contributors, custodians of indigenous knowledge, and active participants in community life. However, their social status is often shaped by traditional customs, cultural practices, access to education, economic opportunities, and changing developmental processes. Therefore, understanding the sociological status of tribal women is essential for examining broader questions of social equity, empowerment, and cultural transformation. India is home to a rich diversity of tribal communities, officially recognized as Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of India. Tribal women contribute substantially to household economies, agricultural activities, forest-based livelihoods, and community welfare (Roy, T., 2017). Despite their contributions, they frequently encounter challenges related to education, healthcare, employment opportunities, social participation, and access to resources. The sociological status of tribal women varies considerably across communities owing to differences in cultural traditions, kinship systems, and socio-economic conditions. Consequently, tribe-specific studies are necessary to appreciate both their strengths and the challenges they face in contemporary society (Anusha V.M. & Muhammed Atheeqe. P.P., 2018). The Rabha tribe is one of the prominent indigenous tribal communities inhabiting the northeastern region of India, particularly in the states of Assam and parts of West Bengal and Meghalaya. The Rabhas possess a rich cultural heritage characterized by distinctive social institutions, traditional beliefs, customs, festivals, and indigenous knowledge systems. Historically,



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Rabha women have played significant roles in family life, agriculture, weaving, and the preservation of cultural traditions. Their active participation in socio-economic activities has contributed substantially to the sustainability of Rabha society. Traditionally, the social organization of the Rabha community has accorded women considerable responsibilities within the household and community. Rabha women are actively engaged in agricultural operations, handicrafts, child-rearing, and the transmission of cultural values across generations. They contribute both productive and reproductive labour, often balancing domestic responsibilities with economic activities. Nevertheless, like many tribal communities undergoing social transition, the Rabha tribe has experienced significant changes resulting from modernization, educational expansion, urbanization, governmental welfare programmes, and increasing integration with mainstream society. These processes of social transformation have created both opportunities and challenges for Rabha women. Improved access to education and governmental development initiatives has enhanced their awareness and participation in social and economic spheres. Simultaneously, issues such as economic vulnerability, unequal access to higher education, changing occupational patterns, and the gradual erosion of traditional cultural practices continue to influence their social position. The intersection of tradition and modernity has significantly shaped the experiences of Rabha women in contemporary times. From a sociological perspective, the status of women encompasses multiple dimensions, including educational attainment, economic participation, decision-making power, social mobility, health, political representation, and cultural recognition. Examining these dimensions among Rabha women provides valuable insights into the changing dynamics of gender relations within tribal societies. Such an analysis not only highlights their contributions and achievements but also identifies areas requiring policy intervention and community-based support (Sarkar, K., 2020). The objective of the study is to explore the sociological status of women among Rabha tribe.

SOCIOLOGICAL STATUS OF WOMEN AMONG RABHA TRIBE

The Rabha tribe is an acknowledged indigenous community predominantly inhabiting regions of North Bengal and Assam. Their social hierarchy, cultural traditions, and economic activities profoundly influence the status of women within the society. Rabha society traditionally demonstrates a patriarchal framework, with men regarded as the heads of houses. Nevertheless, women assume a vital and frequently undervalued role in sustaining familial and communal life. Rabha women play a significant role in home decision-making, particularly in household management, child-rearing, and food security. Notwithstanding patriarchal supremacy, Rabha women experience much greater mobility and engagement in social life than women in numerous other traditional societies. The Rabhas predominantly practise monogamous marriage, allowing women a degree of autonomy in partner selection, indicative of a semi-liberal marital framework. Historically, early marriage was prevalent; now, due to rising awareness and education, the tendency is progressively transitioning towards delayed weddings. In Rabha community, divorce and remarriage are socially sanctioned, and women face less stigma for separation, reflecting a comparatively adaptable social norm. Rabha women make substantial economic contributions through agriculture, forest-related enterprises, and domestic industries, including weaving and handicrafts. Their involvement in agricultural labour is comprehensive, encompassing seeding, harvesting, and processing, rendering them essential contributors to subsistence and income. Nonetheless, despite their economic contributions, land and property ownership remains predominantly held by men, constraining women's



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economic autonomy. Historically, Rabha women have been educationally disadvantaged compared to men because to socio-economic limitations, restricted access to educational institutions, and entrenched gender norms. In recent years, governmental initiatives and NGO interventions have enhanced literacy rates among Rabha women, while disparities remain. Health issues among Rabha women indicate difficulties include inadequate healthcare access, malnutrition, and insufficient awareness of reproductive health. Traditional healing methods and dependence on native remedies remain prominent within Rabha communities, impacting women's health outcomes. Maternal health continues to be a concern, despite a progressive increase in institutional births attributed to government initiatives. Rabha women engage in festivals, rituals, and community meetings, demonstrating their cultural integration and visibility (Sarkar, A. & Mistri, T., 2018). Nevertheless, leadership positions in village councils and decision-making entities remain mainly held by men. The gender-based division of labour is distinctly delineated, with women tasked with both productive and reproductive responsibilities, resulting in a dual burden. Modernisation and globalisation have started to affect the lifestyles, aspirations, and possibilities of Rabha women. The migration and exposure to metropolitan centres have influenced the evolving perspectives on education and employment among younger Rabha women. Government welfare initiatives aimed at indigenous women have enhanced access to financial aid, healthcare services, and skill acquisition. Self-help groups (SHGs) have significantly contributed to the economic and social empowerment of Rabha women. Notwithstanding advancements, challenges such as poverty, illiteracy, and gender inequity continue to impede the comprehensive development of Rabha women. Awareness of legal rights and gender equality is progressively rising, facilitating modest yet favourable social change. The sociological status of women within the Rabha tribe is marked by a combination of traditional roles and developing opportunities, indicating progressive improvement, while substantial hurdles persist in attaining complete empowerment (Rabha, M.D., 2013).

Ethnicity of Women Among Rabha Tribe:

The women of the Rabha tribe in Cooch Behar represent a unique Indo-Mongoloid ethnic group, embodying a fusion of Tibeto-Burman racial and cultural characteristics. Their physical attributes often consist of medium height, a yellowish to pale complexion, straight black hair, and pronounced cheekbones, which correspond with general Mongoloid traits. Rabha women belong to the broader Bodo-Kachari ethnic group, with their identity intricately linked to traditional practices, clan-based social structures, and linguistic history, predominantly connected to the Rabha language. Despite growing assimilation and interaction with adjacent tribes in North Bengal, they maintain their distinct ethnic identity through attire, rituals, culinary practices, and indigenous belief systems, but the impacts of mainstream Hindu culture are becoming increasingly apparent.

Economy and Society of Women Among Rabha Tribe:

The economy and societal roles of women within the Rabha tribe in Cooch Behar are intricately connected to agricultural livelihoods and conventional communal frameworks. Rabha women significantly participate in the household economy by engaging in agriculture, wage work, gathering forest resources, and producing small-scale handicrafts, frequently sharing equal responsibility with males in maintaining family revenue. Socially, they occupy a prominent role inside the family, engaging in decision-making,



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familial networks, and cultural activities, yet their status is influenced by conventional norms and evolving socio-economic conditions. Although traditional practices permit some level of mobility and engagement, constraints including restricted access to education, healthcare, and formal employment persistently affect their socio-economic status. In recent years, heightened exposure to modernisation, government welfare initiatives, and self-help organisations has progressively enhanced their economic autonomy and social consciousness, resulting in a gradual evolution of their role within Rabha society.

Marriage System and Rabha Women:

The matrimonial system among Rabha women in Cooch Behar is traditionally communal and embodies both conventional tribal practices and incremental external influences. Marriages are typically planned with the approval of both families, although aspects of choice and mutual consent are also included. The bride price, as opposed to dowry, is a prevalent aspect, representing the bride's worth within the socio-economic structure of Rabha society. Rabha women typically marry within their tribe but beyond their own clan, adhering to exogamous regulations that govern blood relations. Post-marriage, women engage actively in both home and economic endeavours, sustaining a comparatively collaborative marital partnership. While old customs formerly prevailed within the institution, contemporary factors such as education, legal consciousness, and engagement with the wider community have instigated modifications, resulting in a steady transition towards more individual autonomy and diminished inflexibility in customary behaviours.

Rabha Women Empowerment:

The empowerment of women within the Rabha community in Cooch Behar is progressively advancing through a synthesis of traditional resilience and contemporary developmental activities. Rabha women have historically played a crucial role in home and agricultural economies, fostering a foundational sense of agency; nevertheless, institutional obstacles such as restricted education, healthcare access, and economic opportunities have impeded their complete empowerment. In recent years, engagement in self-help organisations, government welfare initiatives, and educational programmes has improved their financial autonomy, awareness of rights, and decision-making abilities in both familial and communal contexts. Social reforms, such as exposure to mainstream society and enhanced literacy, are prompting Rabha women to confront conventional obstacles, pursue work, and participate more actively in local governance, thus facilitating a gradual yet significant transition toward more empowerment.

Cultural Participation of Rabha Tribe Women:

The cultural engagement of Rabha tribe women in Cooch Behar is dynamic and essential for the preservation of their ethnic identity and traditions. Rabha women participate actively in traditional songs, dances, and ritual acts at community festivals like the Baikho Festival, where they are instrumental in organising and executing cultural activities. They serve as caretakers of traditional garments, weaving techniques, and indigenous culinary practices, which embody their profound cultural history. Rabha women play a crucial role in the intergenerational transfer of cultural knowledge through oral traditions, storytelling, and engagement in life-cycle rituals. Notwithstanding the impact of modernisation and cultural assimilation, their persistent engagement in these rituals aids in preserving the unique character of the Rabha community while progressively adapting to evolving social settings.



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Traditional Religion Perspectives:

The Rabha community in Cooch Behar adheres to an indigenous religious system rooted in animism and nature worship, wherein women assume a significant supportive role in upholding ritual customs. The Rabha religious tradition encompasses the veneration of natural forces, ancestral spirits, and village deities, with rituals predominantly performed by male priests, but women engage actively in preparations, offerings, and ceremonial practices. Festivals like the Baikho Festival embody an agrarian and spiritual perspective, with women participating through singing, dance, and rituals of purity. Despite the growing influence of Hinduism and other organised religions within the community, numerous Rabha women persist in maintaining ancient beliefs and rituals, thereby preserving their indigenous religious identity amid ongoing cultural evolution.

CONCLUSION

The sociological status of women among the Rabha tribe reflects a dynamic interplay between tradition, cultural values, and contemporary social change. Rabha women have historically played a significant role in sustaining their families and communities through their active participation in domestic, economic, agricultural, and cultural activities. Their contributions extend beyond household responsibilities to include involvement in social and community life, highlighting their indispensable position within Rabha society. Despite enjoying relatively greater social freedom than women in many patriarchal communities, Rabha women continue to encounter challenges related to educational attainment, healthcare accessibility, economic opportunities, and political representation. Traditional customs and gender-based divisions of labour often limit their participation in decision-making processes at both the household and community levels. Socio-economic transformations, including modernization, urbanization, and increasing access to education, have created new opportunities for empowerment, yet disparities persist across different regions and socio-economic groups. Education has emerged as a crucial factor influencing the changing status of Rabha women by enhancing awareness, self-reliance, and participation in social and economic spheres. Government welfare programmes, constitutional safeguards for Scheduled Tribes, and the growing involvement of civil society organizations have further contributed to improving their living conditions. Nevertheless, the effective implementation of these initiatives remains essential to ensure that the benefits of development reach all sections of the Rabha community. The study of Rabha women also underscores the importance of preserving indigenous cultural identities while promoting gender equality and social justice. Their traditional knowledge systems, cultural practices, and community-oriented values constitute valuable social capital that deserves recognition and protection. Sustainable development among tribal communities cannot be achieved without addressing the specific needs and aspirations of women, who are central to both cultural continuity and socio-economic progress. In conclusion, the sociological status of women among the Rabha tribe presents a picture of resilience, transformation, and emerging empowerment. While significant progress has been made in improving their social position, continued efforts are necessary to address persistent inequalities and to create an inclusive environment that supports education, economic independence, health, and leadership opportunities. Empowering Rabha women is not merely a matter of gender equity but also a prerequisite for the holistic development and cultural preservation of the Rabha community as a whole.



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